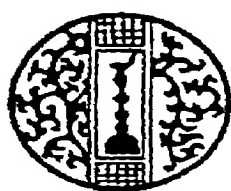


The 1997
Maulana Abul Kalam Azad
Memorial Lecture



Indian Council for Cultural Relations
New Delhi

The Maulana Azad Memorial Lecture 1997

HERITAGE and PROMISE : INDIA OF TOMORROW

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The Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Memorial Lecture

The Indian Council for Cultural Relations is an autonomous body set up by the Government of India in 1950 with a view to establishing, reviving and strengthening cultural relations between India and other countries. This aim is sought to be achieved through a broad range of activities.

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, the first President of the Council, was a multi-faceted personality; a great freedom fighter and an eminent scholar. Instituted in 1958 by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, as a mark of honour to the memory of Maulana Azad, the Azad Memorial Lectures are intended to contribute towards the promotion of better understanding among different peoples of the world. Eminent speakers from India and abroad are invited every year to speak on subjects of importance to humanity at large and, in particular, to the people of India.

The Council has been fortunate in having distinguished intellectuals and public figures deliver the Azad Memorial Lectures. The first lecture was delivered by the late Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, Prime Minister of India. The 32nd Azad Memorial Lecture, was delivered by Shri Inder Kumar Gujral, Prime Minister of India on January 10 1998.

The topic of the lecture was **"HERITAGE and PROMISE: INDIA OF TOMORROW"**.

The Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Memorial Lecture

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HERITAGE AND PROMISE : INDIA OF TOMORROW

I deem it a great honour to deliver this Lecture in remembrance of its founder – the great scholar, patriot and statesman, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad.

In describing him Pandit Nehru had selectively chosen the word “luminous”. Indeed, the Maulana stands out as one of the greatest luminaries not only in our struggle to win freedom, but in shaping the contours of modern India. Panditji had once said that the Maulana combined in himself the greatness of the past, with the greatness of the present. Maulana Azad was quintessentially a man representing, both through his statements as also his deeds, the finest traditions of Indian heritage. Today – as a new millenia dawns upon the horizon, my thoughts naturally dwell on how can this immense heritage of ours – illuminated by such great men like Maulana Abul Kalam Azad be the beacon of promise for tomorrow’s India.

Our philosopher – statesman Dr. Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan, said about the Maulana that he

“stood for what may be called the emancipation of the mind free from superstitions, obscurantism and fanaticism.... Free from narrow prejudices of race or language, province or dialect, religion or caste. He worked for the ideals of national unity, probity in administration and economic progress”.

The Maulana was, as Nehru said in Parliament on his passing away, “a curious combination of the old and the new”. Symbolising, as he did, a glorious synthesis of cultures, civilizations, thoughts and philosophies, which have powerfully influenced Indian history, he was also curiously a bridge between the old and the new. He himself admitted that the division between the old and the new learning meant nothing to him. The old he received as his heritage, and found in his own way to the new, so that the paths of the new became as familiar as those of the old. Yet, Panditji – the most modern mind of our era, clearly recognised that there was in him an understanding of the “urges of today and a modern outlook”, which made him the man he was. In fact, in an editorial commented on his death: Azad brought to Indian nationalism the spirit of a new Renaissance, a new Reformation and a new political wisdom.

Mr. President,

The subject of my lecture today is vast. So much can be included in its purview that it would perhaps require a series of lectures to do full justice to it. However, my attempt will be to carefully select certain elements, which, in my opinion, constitute the core of the heritage to which all of us as Indians are heir to, and focus on some of the key issues which account for the promise of the present, and can help in shaping and tapping the potential of the India of tomorrow.

If we think of our heritage, the first thing that will strike any objective observer is that India is distinguished by a civilisational continuity which is unique and hardly paralleled by any country in the world. For 5000 years, Indian culture and civilisations have evolved in an unbroken continuum. Of course, there have been periods of stagnation, and of setbacks, when the original inspiration has momentarily been overtaken by inertia, and the spark of creativity has been doused sometimes by mechanical ritualism. But, equally, there have been periods of great cultural flowerings when hardly any area of artistic endeavour has not been excelled.

Through these ups and downs, we see a panorama of unfolding civilisational values stretching from the dawn of history to the present time.

A second significant element defining our heritage is that India has always represented creative assimilation rather than intolerant rejection. Many have been the outsiders that have come to India. Some returned and some remained. Over the centuries those that remained became one more strand in the infinitely complex but clearly identifiable Indian way of life. There is something about the Indian soil which allows it to retain, and over time to assimilate, the best of influences – be that of friend or foe.

A third element to which I would like to draw your attention is the spirit of philosophical inquiry, the search for answers, the quest for knowledge, that has made our country the cradle of major religions, and a home to almost all the religions of the world. Many centuries before Christ, our sages, who wrote the Vedas and the Upanishads, rose above the material and the mundane to glimpse the greater Reality. The great Gautama Buddha, found enlightenment meditating at Bodh Gaya.

Likewise, Jainism, Sikhism, Christianity and Islam have found in India not only a place to survive but an environ to flourish.

A fourth element, which is a fundamental aspect of our heritage, is that Indian society is not a monolith. On the contrary, it is, in fact, one of the most diverse societies in the world. We are a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-lingual nation. Our geography combines deserts and seas and rivers and mountains which are among the longest and the tallest in the world. Our climate varies from the coldest to the hottest. Our sartorial variations would take researchers years to compile. Our social structures sanctify the very rich and the very poor, the powerful and the weak.

Mr. President, in 1947, through the crucible of the struggle for freedom, India began the process of transition, from an enduring civilisational concept to that of a modern nation. This transition represented one of the most amazing experiments of this century. The challenge before Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Patel, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, and the other stalwarts of the freedom struggle, was how to convert the heritage

of a civilisation into the promise of a nation. Much, indeed, has been written about how this was achieved. But, once again, I will attempt to touch upon four key approaches, which, in my opinion, allowed this amazing drama to unfold before our eyes. The first, I believe, was a steadfast belief in the principle of a democratic India. Our founding fathers realised that only a democracy, where every individual had the fullest freedom to express his or her political point of view, could succeed in holding together a nation where so many points of view existed. Thus, the making of democratic India, was not only the result of an ideological preference, but a pragmatic understanding of ground realities.

A second factor was the conscious resolve to maintain the religious neutrality of the State. Again, the foresight and logic sustaining this approach is absolutely transparent. In a nation of such religious diversities, and, such a long tradition of religious tolerance, co-existence and harmony, the State could not but be above religious preferences, while guaranteeing, simultaneously, the fullest freedom of faith and worship to all religions.

A third factor was the pronounced bias of the State to act in an interventionist manner to rectify the inequities in society – be they social or economic. Once again, if we reflect a little, we realise how absolutely essential such an approach was to foster a sense of nationhood in all Indians, to inculcate a sense of participation in all the citizens in India and, indeed, to secure the fealty and loyalty of every person to the goals and values of this process of transition.

Lastly, I feel, a critical factor was the deliberate choice of retaining, in full measure, the country's independence of thought and action in foreign policy interactions. It may not appear so obvious, but, I believe, this too fulfilled a crucial psychological need. If, subsequent to the attainment of independence, it was perceived that the very freedom that was earned through such a profoundly ethical and uncompromising struggle, could be bartered away on the altar of expediency in the arena of international relations, it would devalue the struggle and render the compromise unacceptable. It was essential for all Indians to believe that they were part of a process which was in conformity with the dignity of their civilisational

heritage, and that the values of the struggle for freedom would be preserved and applied, uniformly, without differences between the internal and the external.

Mr. President, it was, I believe, with such basic tools, reflecting both approach and commitment, that the promise of Indian nationhood was launched. This year, we celebrate the Golden Jubilee of our Independence. For all Indians, it is a reason to rejoice, but also cause to reflect. What have we achieved in these last five decades? How much more still remains to be done? What are our strengths? How can we nurture these strengths? What are our weaknesses, and why have some new ones assumed such an alarming profile? What yardstick do we use to judge our achievements and our failures? What goals should we set now?

These are but some of the questions which, on the basis of our past, and the potential of our present, must and will influence the form and content of India tomorrow. There can be little doubt that there are some very valid reasons to rejoice. In 1947 there were, I clearly recall, many distinguished observers who felt that India would not survive. For

many, India was not even a nation. It was merely, as Churchill once said, an artificial construct, as much a nation as is the equator. There were others who felt that once the “paternalistic” control of the colonial power receded, India would explode into a million sterile mutinies. Many believed that India would remain a basket-case, forever diminished by the scourge of poverty and disease. Questions were asked, when Jawaharlal Nehru died, about the survival of the Indian democratic system. Many thought then that democracy would never grow strong roots in a country where feudalism had reigned undisturbed for so long. There were people, in 1947, who felt that India had more to do with Maharajas and snake charmers than with the attributes of a resurgent nation.

I believe that the real promise of India lies in its abilities to have proved such Cassandras, such prophets of doom, resoundingly wrong. Some observers will say that this is a subjective assessment, which is unduly biased by my own experience in the last 50 years.

Mr. President, 50 years ago my wife and I came to New Delhi as refugees from Pakistan. 50 years

later, I have the honour of being the Prime Minister of India. For me, therefore, the survival of India is not a matter of academic inference but a glorious reality, a benediction. Perhaps my sense of faith and optimism in the destiny of my country is excessive. Maybe. But, I have not the slightest hesitation in saying that, if we were to draw a balance-sheet of what our achievements are today in order to assess what our promise will be tomorrow, I believe the pros will out-number the cons. Democracy is a way of life in the India of today. It has grown deep roots. More people vote in a general election in India than the entire population of Europe. Again, while there may be differences of approach and emphasis, I believe that all Indians are fully committed to the preservation and strengthening of our pluralism, our tradition of tolerance, and respect for all religions. Far from being a matter of debate, the unity of India is no longer even a question. All Indians are committed to India because, in the last five decades, they have had ample reason to understand, that it is only in so doing that they can best promote their own interests.

I do concede that the grand symphony that

animates a democratic society is sometimes less clearly heard in the medley of voices that echo, rebound and reverberate in the spontaneous interactions of an open society. There is, indeed, occasionally the discordant voice as well. But we must realise that this new assertiveness, even aggression, is often a symptom of people becoming more aware of their democratic rights. This is the natural process in the evolution of a democracy. It is this greater assertiveness – of peoples and classes hitherto more compliant, and of regions hitherto less represented – which is, in a real sense, the greatest tribute to Indian democracy.

In the economic sphere too, we have done well, even if it may be said that we could have done better. The important thing is that in our country democracy and economic growth have never been at the cost of one or the other. It may be true that certain economic goals can perhaps be achieved faster and more effectively if the right to dissent and the freedom of expression were curtailed. Many countries have been unable to resist such a temptation, but in India, the democratic spirit has created change. And, the truth is that a great deal has indeed been achieved in the last 50 years,

peacefully and within a democratic framework. The Green Revolution has made us food self-sufficient, with even a small surplus for export. We have a diversified industrial base. Our reservoir of skilled trained man-power is one of the most extensive in the world. In many areas of scientific research, we are at the cutting edge. Our people have the skills. Our entrepreneurs have talent and drive. The economic reform process enjoys support across the political spectrum. The vital indicators are positive. Our foreign exchange reserves have never been higher. Inflation of around 4% has never been lower. The economy has been growing at an average of 6 to 7% every year for the last 3 years. A new middle-class has emerged, which according to some estimates, is as much as the entire population of India at the time of its independence.

There is, therefore, reason to rejoice, to look back with some degree of satisfaction, at what has been achieved. But if we are to talk of the India of tomorrow, there can be no room for complacency. The battle has just begun, and is far from being fully won. The pledge has been made, but not yet fully redeemed. The dream has been seen, but has yet to become, in full measure, a reality.

If we want to make the India of tomorrow, live up to its promise, and the potential inherent in our collective heritage, what must we do? Mr. President, we stand today not at one milestone but indeed at two land-marks: the Golden Jubilee of our freedom and the threshold of the new millennium. This is the time for clarity, for vision, for an ability to rise above narrow considerations, and work for the good of India as a whole. It is the moment to understand that a nation grows as much through a process of reflection as by deeds. It is the occasion to comprehend that a people come into their own as much by restraint as by resolve. It is the juncture to realise that a country matures not only through a blind acceptance of the given, but the exercise of the right choices.

What are the choices which a great India must exercise in the future? I am absolutely clear that the first imperative is the empowerment of that India which is still battling with the problems of hunger, shelter and disease. Indians, who are somewhat better off, need to free themselves once and for all of the illusion that the successful in this country can secede. There cannot be two Indias in one: one living at the edge of change and the other

unmoving; one living at the edge of globalisation and the other resigned to be marginalised. The need to temper growth with equity was a legacy of the founding fathers of our nation. The time has come to give that legacy a more complete implementation. The imperative of today is to move beyond intention to actual change at the ground-level. The challenge today is not so much the mere articulation of goals, but the ability of these goals to transform real lives. India, cannot be great if nearly half its population is illiterate; India can never tap its full potential if its women are not given their due, and India cannot truly fulfil itself if so many of its people still suffer and die from mal-nutrition.

Mr. President, a second pre-condition for forging the new India of tomorrow is the strengthening of the forces of federalism within our polity. India is too vast and too diverse to be ruled by the uniformity of an excessively centralised State. It must allow the fullest representation to its great diversities and this can only be possible within the framework of a vibrant and cooperative federalism. I believe that a polity which progressively makes this possible will strengthen the unity of the nation. I have personal experience of presiding over a Cabinet

which has representation from almost every part of the country and which enables all the regions of the country to have the chance of direct participation in national governance. This is specially important because the India of tomorrow will be the India of new opportunities. Its people will find new ways of expressing themselves and new avenues to project their expressions. They will be exposed to new influences. They will be prodded and prompted by new aspirations. This will be an India teeming with desire and expectation. Such an India to be cohesive, must be truly representative. And representativeness in India can only be fully ensured by strengthening the unity of the country through the forces of a decentralised federalism at all levels : from a village Panchyat upwards.

A third imperative is to take a very serious look at some of the aberrations which have crept into the functioning of our democracy. The fact that India is the world's largest democracy is not in dispute. What is in dispute is often the calibre and the quality that infuses the democratic canvas. The loss of ethics, of values, of principles, of a sense of rectitude, of balance, of probity and of percepts

and of basic honesty, is there for all to see. For a democracy to be truly great, people must not only have the freedom to vote; they must also have the freedom of choice – not between the bad and the worse, but between the best and the better. It is a matter of deep regret that criminals have found a refuge in the political process. Some of those who should have been in jail, are today in state legislatures and even in Parliament. Such a situation makes a mockery of the very freedoms which democracy nurtures. I have often said that the ballot box is an icon in the temple of democracy. There is a prime need to restore decency and basic virtues in public life. Unless this happens people will lose faith in the efficacy of the democratic system. This would be an unmitigated tragedy.

A fourth aspect, demanding clear-headed choices, relates to our foreign policy interactions. I believe, Mr. President that India will benefit by emerging as a factor of peace and stability in its region. This does not for a moment imply that we become in any way less sensitive to our national interests. What this does imply, however, is a larger vision, an ability to see beyond the immediate, with a view to pursue our long-term interests. I am happy

that already there seems to be a consensus on the need to continue policies which enhance the atmosphere of trust and cooperation in our region. There are other choices which will be equally valid. A significant one would require us to further strengthen forums for regional cooperation, first of all, in South Asia, but also beyond, in the Indian Ocean Rim, and in Asia as a whole. We will also have to learn to use our economic strengths as a means of obtaining, through international intercourse, concrete benefits for our people. The need to preserve our independence of thinking, particularly in such vital areas as security and nuclear disarmament, hardly needs to be reiterated. And finally, India will, in the years ahead, need to assert its legitimate claim to have a place at the decision-making level in major international forums, including, of course, the United Nations and the Security Council.

Mr. President, an India committed to work for the deprived and the down-trodden; an India committed to giving a new interpretation to the well-established maxim of unity in diversity; an India committed to cleansing its political process of the aberrations that have crept into it; and an India

clear-sightedly pursuing its foreign policy interests – such an India will I hope be the India of tomorrow: self-confident, united, democratic and strong.

I have reason to believe that there is a real basis to my hopes. Some recent trends are encouraging. The nation, benefiting from 50 years of nationhood, is developing some very critical consensus making abilities. Differences are indeed articulated with great vigour; but somewhere there is also the right degree of yielding, of pulling back, of understanding that in matters critical for the nation, divisions are important but also unity and consensus. We are also gradually developing our own self-correcting mechanisms. Of course, democracy is the greatest of these. History is about learning from mistakes. Experience comes by observing the past. Today, as a nation, I see the first signs of an ability to take corrective steps in the interests of the nation, when necessary, and by all concerned. Another great strength is the strength of institutions. A nation may be built on the foundations of good intentions but it survives on the strength of well-established institutions. We can be proud of our ever-alert media, our vigilant judiciary and other independent bodies which give real credibility to a democracy. I am

also enthused by the gradual --and some would say far too gradual -- development of a coalition culture. The true test of a democracy lies in its ability to adjust to the real mandate of the people. There was a time when single party governments were possible. I believe that time is over. Coalitions will be the norm for the foreseeable future. The India of tomorrow must learn to deal with them, and this process has I think already begun.

Mr. President, I am confident that the next century will be the century of India. This is not a matter of faith alone. I genuinely believe that the best is yet to be. Our founding fathers, among whom the Maulana shone so luminously, began a journey. The journey is not yet complete. We have crossed many milestones. But the destination is still ahead, and not too distant, when the India of tomorrow will truly come into its own, fulfilling, in all its rainbow colours, the hopes and dreams of those who won freedom for us.

And yet, the price of this will have to be eternal vigilance. Vigilance and the ability to dream, to think big, to think ahead, to rise above the small and the petty and to think, above all, of India. If we, as a nation can do this, the India of tomorrow

will surpass all our expectations. But, if we don't, I can only repeat the immortal warning of Iqbal:

*Agar ab bhee na samjhogey to
mit jao'gey duni'ya sey,
Tumharee dastan tak bhee
na hogee dastanon meyn.*

If even now you understand not,
razed from the world you would be,
Even your story will not be found
in the annals of history.

But I am certain this will not be, and we shall be
a great nation.

